

CHAPTER VII.

HIS NOMINATION FOR THE PRESIDENCY.

On the 12th of June, 1852, the democratic national convention assembled at Baltimore, in order to select a candidate for the presidency of the United States. Many names, eminently distinguished in peace and war, had been brought before the public, during several months previous; and among them, though by no means occupying a very prominent place, was the name of Franklin Pierce. In January of this year, the democracy of New Hampshire had signified its preference of General Pierce as a presidential candidate in the approaching canvass — a demonstration which drew from him the following response, addressed to his friend, Mr. Atherton:—

“I am far from being insensible to the generous confidence, so often manifested towards me by the people of this state; and although the object indicated in the resolution, having particular reference to myself, be not one of desire on my part, the expression is not on that account less gratifying.

“Doubtless the spontaneous and just appreciation of an intelligent people is the best earthly reward for earnest and cheerful services rendered

to one's state and country; and while it is a matter of unfeigned regret that my life has been so barren of usefulness, I shall ever hold this and similar tributes among my most cherished recollections.

“To these, my sincere and grateful acknowledgments, I desire to add, that the same motives which induced me, several years ago, to retire from public life, and which, since that time, controlled my judgment in this respect, now impel me to say, that the use of my name, in any event, before the democratic national convention at Baltimore, to which you are a delegate, would be utterly repugnant to my tastes and wishes.”

The sentiments expressed in the above letter were genuine, and from his heart. He had looked long and closely at the effects of high public station on the character and happiness, and on what is the innermost and dearest part of a man's possessions — his independence; and he had satisfied himself that office, however elevated, should be avoided for one's own sake, or accepted only as a good citizen would make any other sacrifice, at the call and at the need of his country.

As the time for the assembling of the national convention drew near, there were other sufficient indications of his sincerity in declining a stake in the great game. A circular letter was addressed, by Major Scott of Virginia, to the distinguished democrats whose claims had heretofore been publicly discussed, requesting a statement of their

opinions on several points, and inquiring what would be the course of each of these gentlemen, in certain contingencies, in case of his attaining the presidency. These queries, it may be presumed, were of such a nature that General Pierce might have answered them, had he seen fit to do so, to the satisfaction of Major Scott himself, or to that of the southern democratic party, whom it seemed his purpose to represent. With not more than one exception, the other statesmen and soldiers, to whom the circular had been sent, made a response. General Pierce preserved an unbroken silence. It was equivalent to the withdrawal of all claims which he might be supposed to possess, in reference to the contemplated office; and he thereby repeated, to the delegates of the national party, the same avowal of distaste for public life which he had already made known to the Democracy of his native state. He had thus done every thing in his power, actively or passively,—every thing that he could have done, without showing such an estimate of his position before the country as was inconsistent with the modesty of his character,—to avoid the perilous and burdensome honor of the candidacy.

The convention met, at the date above mentioned, and continued its sessions during four days. Thirty-five ballotings were held, with a continually decreasing prospect that the friends of any one of the gentlemen hitherto prominent before

the people would succeed in obtaining the two thirds vote that was requisite for a nomination. Thus far, not a vote had been thrown for General Pierce; but, at the thirty-sixth ballot, the delegation of old Virginia brought forward his name. In the course of several more trials, his strength increased, very gradually at first, but afterwards with a growing impetus, until, at the forty-ninth ballot, the votes were for Franklin Pierce two hundred and eighty-two, and eleven for all other candidates. Thus Franklin Pierce became the nominee of the convention; and as quickly as the lightning flash could blazen it abroad, his name was on every tongue, from end to end of this vast country. Within an hour he grew to be illustrious.

It would be a pretension, which we do not mean to put forward, to assert that, whether considering the length and amount of his public services, or his prominence before the country, General Pierce stood on equal ground with several of the distinguished men, whose claims, to use the customary phrase, had been rejected in favor of his own. But no man, be his public services or sacrifices what they might, ever did or ever could possess, in the slightest degree, what we may term a legitimate claim to be elevated to the rulership of a free people. The nation would degrade itself, and violate every principle upon which its institutions are founded, by offering its majestic obedience to one of its citizens as a reward for whatever splendor

of achievement. The conqueror may assert a claim, such as it is, to the sovereignty of the people whom he subjugates; but, with us Americans, when a statesman comes to the chief direction of affairs, it is at the summons of the nation, addressed to the servant whom it deems best fitted to spend his wisdom, his strength, and his life, in its behalf. On this principle, which is obviously the correct one, a candidate's previous services are entitled to consideration only as they indicate the qualities which may enable him to render higher services in the position which his countrymen choose that he shall occupy. What he has done is of no importance, except as proving what he can do. And it is on this score, because they see in his public course the irrefragable evidences of patriotism, integrity, and courage, and because they recognize in him the noble gift of natural authority, and have a prescience of the stately endowment of administrative genius, that his fellow-citizens are about to summon Franklin Pierce to the presidency. To those who know him well, the event comes, not like accident, but as a consummation which might have been anticipated, from its innate fitness, and as the final step of a career which, all along, has tended thitherward.

It is not as a reward that he will take upon him the mighty burden of this office, of which the toil and awful responsibility whiten the statesman's head, and in which, as in more than one instance

we have seen, the warrior encounters a deadlier risk than in the battle field. When General Pierce received the news of his nomination, it affected him with no thrill of joy, but a sadness, which, for many days, was perceptible in his deportment. It awoke in his heart the sense of religious dependence — a sentiment that has been growing continually stronger, through all the trials and experiences of his life; and there was nothing feigned in that passage of his beautiful letter, accepting the nomination, in which he expresses his reliance upon heavenly support.

The committee, appointed by the Baltimore convention, conveyed to him the intelligence of his nomination in the following terms:—

“A national convention of the democratic republican party, which met in Baltimore on the first Tuesday in June, unanimously nominated you as a candidate for the high trust of the President of the United States. We have been delegated to acquaint you with the nomination, and earnestly to request that you will accept it. Persuaded as we are that this office should never be pursued by an unchastened ambition, it cannot be refused by a dutiful patriotism.

“The circumstances under which you will be presented for the canvass of your countrymen seem to us propitious to the interests which the constitution intrusts to our Federal Union, and must be auspicious to your own name. You come

before the people without the impulse of personal wishes, and free from selfish expectations. You are identified with none of the distractions which have recently disturbed our country, whilst you are known to be faithful to the constitution—to all its guaranties and compromises. You will be free to exercise your tried abilities, within the path of duty, in protecting that repose we happily enjoy, and in giving efficacy and control to those cardinal principles that have already illustrated the party which has now selected you as its leader—principles that regard the security and prosperity of the whole country, and the paramount power of its laws, as indissolubly associated with the perpetuity of our civil and religious liberties.

“The convention did not pretermitt the duty of reiterating those principles, and you will find them prominently set forth in the resolutions it adopted. To these we respectfully invite your attention.

“It is firmly believed that to your talents and patriotism the security of our holy Union, with its expanded and expanding interests, may be wisely trusted, and that, amid all the perils which may assail the constitution, you will have the heart to love and the arm to defend it.”

We quote likewise General Pierce's reply:—

“I have the honor to acknowledge your personal kindness in presenting me, this day, your letter, officially informing me of my nomination, by the democratic national convention, as a candidate for

the presidency of the United States. The surprise with which I received the intelligence of my nomination was not unmingled with painful solicitude; and yet it is proper for me to say that the manner in which it was conferred was peculiarly gratifying.

“The delegation from New Hampshire, with all the glow of state pride, and with all the warmth of personal regard, would not have submitted my name to the convention, nor would they have cast a vote for me, under circumstances other than those which occurred.

“I shall always cherish with pride and gratitude the recollection of the fact, that the voice which first pronounced, and pronounced alone, came from the Mother of States—a pride and gratitude rising above any consequences that can betide me personally. May I not regard it as a fact pointing to the overthrow of sectional jealousies, and looking to the permanent life and vigor of the Union, cemented by the blood of those who have passed to their reward?—a Union wonderful in its formation, boundless in its hopes, amazing in its destiny.

“I accept the nomination, relying upon an abiding devotion to the interests, honor, and glory of the whole country, but, above and beyond all, upon a Power superior to all human might—a Power which, from the first gun of the revolution, in every crisis through which we have passed, in every

hour of acknowledged peril, when the dark clouds had shut down over us, has interposed as if to baffle human wisdom, outmarch human forecast, and bring out of darkness the rainbow of promise. Weak myself, faith and hope repose there in security.

"I accept the nomination upon the platform adopted by the convention, not because this is expected of me as a candidate, but because the principles it embraces command the approbation of my judgment; and with them, I believe I can safely say, there has been no word nor act of my life in conflict."

The news of his nomination went abroad over the Union, and, far and wide, there came a response, in which was distinguishable a truer appreciation of some of General Pierce's leading traits than could have been anticipated; considering the unobtrusive tenor of his legislative life, and the lapse of time since he had entirely withdrawn himself from the nation's eye. It was the marvelous and mystic influence of character, in regard to which the judgment of the people is so seldom found erroneous, and which conveys the perception of itself through some medium higher and deeper than the intellect. Every where the country knows that a man of steadfast will, true heart, and generous qualities has been brought forward, to receive the suffrages of his fellow-citizens.

He comes before the people of the United States

at a remarkable era in the history of this country and of the world. The two great parties of the nation appear—at least to an observer somewhat removed from both—to have nearly merged into one another; for they preserve the attitude of political antagonism rather through the effect of their old organizations, than because any great and radical principles are at present in dispute between them. The measures advocated by the one party, and resisted by the other, through a long series of years, have now ceased to be the pivots on which the election turns. The prominent statesmen, so long identified with those measures, will henceforth relinquish their controlling influence over public affairs. Both parties, it may likewise be said, are united in one common purpose—that of preserving our sacred Union, as the immovable basis from which the destinies, not of America alone, but of mankind at large, may be carried upward and consummated. And thus men stand together, in unwonted quiet and harmony, awaiting the new movement in advance which all these tokens indicate.

It remains for the citizens of this great country to decide, within the next few weeks, whether they will retard the steps of human progress by placing at its head an illustrious soldier, indeed, a patriot, and one indelibly stamped into the history of the past, but who has already done his work, and

has not in him the spirit of the present or of the coming time, — or whether they will put their trust in a new man, whom a life of energy and various activity has tested, but not worn out, and advance with him into the auspicious epoch upon which we are about to enter.

NOTES.

A.

WE have done far less than justice to Franklin Pierce's college standing, in our statement on page 16. Some circumstances connected with this matter are too characteristic not to be recorded.

During the first two years, Pierce was extremely inattentive to his college duties, bestowing only such modicum of time upon them as was requisite to supply the merest superficial acquaintance with the course of study, for the recitation room. The consequence was, that, when the relative standing of the members of the class was first authoritatively ascertained, in the junior year, he found himself occupying precisely the lowest position in point of scholarship. In the first mortification of wounded pride, he resolved never to attend another recitation, and accordingly absented himself from college exercises of all kinds for several days, expecting and desiring that some form of punishment, such as suspension or expulsion, would be the result. The faculty of the college, however, with a wise lenity, took no notice of this behavior; and at last, having had time to grow cool, and moved by the grief of his friend Little and another classmate, Pierce determined to resume the routine of college duties. "But," said he to his friends, "if I do so, you shall see a change!"

Accordingly, from that time forward, he devoted himself to study. His mind, having run wild for so long a period, could be reclaimed only by the severest efforts of an iron resolution;

and for three months afterwards, he rose at four in the morning, toiled all day over his books, and retired only at midnight, allowing himself but four hours for sleep. With habit and exercise, he acquired command over his intellectual powers, and was no longer under the necessity of application so intense. But from the moment when he made his resolve until the close of his college life, he never incurred a censure, never was absent (and then unavoidably) but from two college exercises, never went into the recitation room without a thorough acquaintance with the subject to be recited, and finally graduated as the third scholar of his class. Nothing save the low standard of his previous scholarship prevented his taking a yet higher rank.

The moral of this little story lies in the stern and continued exercise of self-controlling will, which redeemed him from indolence, completely changed the aspect of his character, and made this the turning point of his life.

B.

In the dearth of other matter with which to carry on the war, the whig journals lay great stress on the responsibility which they allege against General Pierce and his political friends for the continued existence of the religious test in the constitution of New Hampshire. Since our own remarks on this subject were in type, we have examined a pamphlet, from the press of the Boston Post, in which the question is thoroughly discussed, and facts adduced which irrefragably prove the following positions, viz. :—

“That the exclusion clauses in the New Hampshire constitution were put into it in 1784, before parties had formed, and were retained in it in 1792, when the federal or whig party was in power; and that to expunge them, it requires that a convention be called, and that a vote of two thirds of the people should accept the amendments it proposes, while it is made a duty of

the people to vote on the question of calling a convention every seven years:

“That the democratic journals have denounced these exclusion clauses as contrary to every principle of reason, justice, and common sense, and constantly advocated a revision of the constitution:

“That the leading democratic politicians have taken the same course in their political speeches; and instances are specified where they have, in political meetings, gone from town to town advocating a convention:

“That democratic county and state conventions have, in formal resolutions, unqualifiedly repudiated these clauses, and declared in favor of a revision of the constitution; and these resolutions are quoted:

“That so united was thought to be democratic public opinion against them, and so thoroughly was it in favor of a revision of the constitution, that its leading organ, the N. H. Patriot, October 17, 1844, declared that the universal sense of the democratic party was against them, and asserted, October 31, 1844, that it could say, with truth, there was not one intelligent member of the democratic party who was not in favor of a revision of the constitution:

“That in the convention of 1850, called to revise the constitution, Judge Woodbury and General Pierce made speeches against this test; and in a second session, after the amendments had been rejected, that they succeeded in getting the question submitted, together with another question, to the people:

“That in all these movements General Pierce actively participated: that in the canvass of 1844, he went from town to town urging a revision of the constitution, and that year was denounced by the whigs because he advised all the democratic votes to be printed in favor of a call for a convention: that in 1845, he, with others, in a democratic convention, reported a resolution, which passed, repudiating the tests: that in 1850, he labored in the convention, in both sessions, to repeal it: that in the caucus of the democrats at Concord, and in town meeting

in Concord, he made speeches in favor of blotting out the test: that he has uniformly, by pen and speech, denounced it as a stigma on the state:

"That the whig assertion, that the democratic party could every seven years have repealed this test 'for the last sixty years,' or 'at any time the last quarter of a century,' is an enormous falsehood; for facts show that it was not until the sixth septennial period, or 1829, that the democrats obtained even a majority ascendancy: that within twenty-five years there have been two whig governors: that in 1838 their majority was but 2800, in 1843 but 1600, and in 1846 they were in a minority, and that, in a contest, they never have had the two thirds vote required to alter the constitution: and that, at the only period when amendments to the constitution have been voted on since 1792, that is, on the amendments of 1850, the democratic party lacked ten thousand votes of having two thirds:

"That whig editorials, during the canvass of 1844, previous to the convention of 1850, during the sittings of the first session of that convention, and at its second session,—all which are quoted, and the dates of which are given,—either were in opposition to the call of a convention, or threatened that, if amendments approved by them were not adopted, opposition would be made to all amendments, or endeavored to array the prejudices of the people against the convention and its amendments, on the ground that of its forty thousand dollars expense, and, forsooth, because the convention chose to pass a series of compromise resolutions introduced by General Pierce. There is the language of the whig editorials, and it speaks for itself. All this shows conclusively that while the democratic party, in all the various ways it could, was denouncing the tests and urging a convention, the whig party was endeavoring to turn democratic action to party account. There is the record, and its force cannot be avoided. The inference is a just and a fair one—had the whig organs forgot party, the tests would have been abolished!

"Such is the conclusiveness with which the democratic party

and General Pierce can be vindicated from this charge of intolerance, and such is the position of the party that makes this charge! But, setting all this aside, is it too much to invoke the candid and the patriotic, of all parties, to brand this business as disgraceful to those who engage in it; and to denounce this special appeal to a sect in religion, in order to get its members to vote a certain way in politics, as a gross violation of the spirit of our institutions, and a wanton insult alike to the intelligence and patriotism of American citizens? This desperate and unparalleled electioneering experiment, for many reasons, deserves a disgraceful defeat.

"Again we ask, As truth makes its way in the track of falsehood, will not the base charge, instead of injuring General Pierce or the democratic party, recoil with fearful effect on those who utter it?"

At the town meeting in Concord, while the votes were being cast on the amendments proposed by the constitutional convention, General Pierce addressed his fellow-citizens with reference to the test. His speech is described as one which, for impassioned eloquence and power, could scarcely be surpassed; and it is difficult to imagine a stronger expression of abhorrence for the obnoxious law than is contained in the following imperfectly-reported passage:—

"Can it be possible," said he, "that the people of New Hampshire will vote to retain a feature in its fundamental law, ingrafted there under peculiar circumstances, repugnant to the plainest ideas of justice and equality, repugnant to the whole scope and tenor of the constitution, upon which it stands as a fungus—dead, to be sure, but still there, a blot and deformity, obnoxious in the last degree to the spirit of the age in which we live? How can we say that our land is the asylum of the oppressed of other countries, when we fail to extend over them the shield of equal rights, and say to them, There is the panoply under which, so far as the dearest and most sacred of all rights is concerned, you may shelter yourselves? I love and revere the faith of my Protestant fathers; but do not Martin Lawler

and his countrymen, now near me, and who have this day exercised the rights of freemen, revere and cling to the faith of *their* fathers? Are you to tell them that they can vote for you, but are to be excluded from the privilege of being voted for? that while you tax them to maintain your government, they shall not be eligible to positions that control taxation? Shame upon such a provision, while we boast of equal rights! I hope this provision of our constitution receives the deliberate reprobation of every man now in this hall. But if I am mistaken in this, it is due to the honor of the state, it is due to the plainest dictates of justice, that whoever may favor this test should state the reasons upon which he relies. For one, I never think of it without a deep sense of regret, and, I may add, of humiliation for my native state."

THE END.

WINTHROP
LIFE
OF
PIERCE

MAJOR L. C. S.